

exceptionally large Aldabra specimen—the only one with a wing-length of as much as 54 mm., a female—weighed 10.5 gms. Nine other Aldabra birds, mist-netted by A. W. Diamond or A. W. Hutson, and released after examination, had wing-lengths of 51–52 mm., and weighed 6–9 (7.6) gms. Incidentally, according to Benson (1967: 106) there is no white-eye on Assumption, and none was seen when I was on that island on 15th/16th September, 1967, after an earlier visit to Aldabra.

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Additional information on the carpometacarpal process as a taxonomic character

by C. J. O. Harrison

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Pocock (1966) examined some osteological characters of African birds and found a consistent pattern in the presence or absence of a process on the outer edge of the carpometacarpus. He considered that this process had some taxonomic significance and that it could be used to show relationships between passerine taxa. He separated the passerines into two groups on the

basis of this character, the "lanoid" group in which the process was absent, and the "passeroid" group in which it was present. He examined this character in African species only, but suggested that it could be used to determine the affinities of "problem" genera found elsewhere.

It has been possible to examine osteological material in the British Museum (Natural History) for a number of species, in particular those of Australian families, some of which have problematical affinities, and the results are given below.

The process was found to be absent from the examined specimens in the following genera:

Cracticidae—*Cracticus*, *Strepera*, *Gymnorhina*.

Artamidae—*Artamus*.

Grallinidae—*Grallina*, *Struthidea*, *Corcorax*.

Dicruridae—*Dicrurus*.

Campephagidae—*Campephaga*, *Coracina*, *Pericrocotus*.

It was present in the examined specimens of the following genera:

Hirundinidae—*Hylocichla*.

Timaliidae—*Pomatostomus*, *Orthonyx*, *Cinclosoma*, *Chamaea*, *Malurus* (see Harrison & Parker 1965).

Dicaeidae—*Pardalotus*.

Sittidae—*Sitta*, *Neositta*.

Paridae—*Parus*.

Aegithalidae—*Aegithalos*.

Prunellidae—*Prunella*.

If the differences were as clear-cut as this it would be a fairly easy character to use for separation, even though there is some doubt about its significance and function, but the pattern of occurrence is not quite so simple. In some birds the process is present in a very reduced form, and it may be more easily detected by touch, a fingernail being run along the bone to detect the slight prominence, than by searching for visible signs of it. It is present but poorly defined in the Climacteridae (*Climacteris*) and the Epthianuridae (*Epthianura*). In the Meliphagidae it is present and distinct in a number of species in the genera *Meliphaga* and *Plectorhyncha*; but in *Myzantha* it is individually variable, being either poorly defined or absent in different individuals of the same species; and it is almost absent in *Anthochaera* and quite absent in *Entomyzon*. It is present in *Promerops* but since it is also present in the Nectariniidae this is not helpful in placing the genus.

In the Muscipapidae (used in the broad sense but omitting the Timaliidae, here regarded as a separate family) the process is present in the Turdinae (*Turdus*), the Sylviinae (*Regulus*), and Acanthizinae (*Apeltocephala*, *Acanthiza*, *Chthonicola*); but in the Pachycephalinae it is present in *Colluricincla* and *Oreoica*, barely present in *Falcunculus*, and absent in two specimens of *Pachycephala rufiventris* that were examined, although *Colluricincla* and *Pachycephala* are scarcely separable (Deignan 1964). In the Muscipapinae its absence is confirmed in three species of fantail-flycatcher of the genus *Rhipidura*, and in monarchine flycatchers of the genera *Myiagra*, *Seisura*, *Monarcha* and *Piezorhynchus*.

In view of this variation it seems inadvisable to place much weight upon presence or absence of the process in single species of doubtful taxonomic

affinities. It is absent in *Pityriasis* which might or might not confirm an affinity with the Prionopidae. It is present in *Bombycilla garrulus* and present but poorly defined in *Hypocolius ampelinus*, and were this of vital significance it would separate them from the shrikes and related families with which they are grouped by some taxonomists.

Although when used as a single character the taxonomic value of the presence of this process is uncertain, it does provide additional morphological variation which might be useful in conjunction with other characters.

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The Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*) breeding in the Maltese Islands

by J. Sultana

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The Maltese islands, with an area of 122 square miles and a population of well over 300,000, lack large uninhabited areas, permanent fresh water, woods and other suitable habitats for most breeding birds. Apart from this, bird protection is non-existent, and so one is not surprised to find that the number of the islands' breeding birds is very limited. It was, therefore, with some satisfaction that last year I added *Passer montanus* to the list. J. Gibb (1951) did not meet with this species during his stay in Malta but he included it in the list of species that breed in Sicily and for which there is suitable habitat in the Maltese islands.

The Tree Sparrow has previously been recorded as an irregular and scarce passage migrant. A. Schembri (1843) listed it as rather rare and erroneously stated that it bred. In fact he begged C. A. Wright (1864) "to correct an error he fell into, in saying that this species bred in Malta". G. Despott (1917) mentions that it occurred in fair numbers in the autumn of 1912, and he did not include it in "The Breeding Birds of Malta". E. L. Roberts (1954) did not mention that *Passer montanus* may have bred or is breeding in the Maltese islands and he wrote "Dr. DeLuca records a pair of the nominate race taken at Gnejna in the autumn 1947. He believes that great numbers of Tree Sparrows pass at irregular intervals of years, and that a few may pass every year during autumn." C. & V. DeLuca (1959) mention an example which was taken in October 1958 and they state that it is a very scarce and irregular species. C. De Lucca (1967) gives another record of one taken in December 1966 at Wied id-Dis, vicinity of Gharghur.

On 30th April, 1967, while bird watching at Marsalforn Valley, limits of Xaghra, in Gozo, I heard frequent calls of the Tree Sparrow and after further investigation I saw that some were darting in and out under the arches of a limestone bridge. I noted at least four pairs of *Passer montanus* and six pairs of *Passer hispaniolensis* going in crevices in the arches. I also noted that the